

# What a Quaint Himachal Hamlet Has in Common with Greek Meltdown

by Varun B Krishnan

**A**s panic gripped markets, courtesy the Greek tailspin, one of the first things Indians wanted to know was the depth of the connection between the two economies. All is well now, with economy and finance gurus saying it isn't a mayday situation back home. The bailout is on, but I was reminded of another possible connect between the two nations, one that dates back some 300 years before Christ.

Alexander the Great descended on what is modern day India and Pakistan in 326 BC and decimated the forces of King Porus of the Punjab, in the Battle of the Hydaspes, on the banks of the Jhelum. Braving a storm and a tricky river-crossing, a portion of his battle-worn army mutinied at the Hyphasis river (Beas) and refused to march further. There is a belief that some of them may have settled here and founded Malana, now a small, isolated village of about 1,500 people nestled in the Parvathi Valley in Himachal Pradesh. The villagers themselves claim Greek ancestry.

There is, however, another tale of how the village — perhaps the oldest democracy in India — was formed. Legend has it that the sage Jamlu laid down rules and regulations according to which the village has to be administered, and these have been followed since. For some trekkers and foreigners, Malana's reputation as a hashish haven supersedes all other facets of the place. 'Malana cream', thought to be one of the primary sources of income in the village, is arguably the best in this

part of the world. The villagers speak a language called Kanashi, a Sino-Tibetan tongue that is confined to their village. We, the 'outsiders', passed through the main pathways of the village — incidentally, the only paths outsiders are allowed to tread. Our guides for that section of the trek, which would take us all the way to Chanderkhani pass, about 13,000 feet above sea-level, would not eat with us when invited. "I can eat only at home, and only after a purification ritual," one of the guides told us. In the village, while the adults stared at the passing trekkers

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**OUTSIDE THE TEMPLES HUNG  
BOARDS SAYING PHOTOGRAPHY  
AND TOUCHING WERE BANNED —  
DETRACTORS WILL BE FINED ₹2,500**

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and chattered away in their unintelligible tongues, the children constantly demanded 'toppi' and 'chokolat'. It took us a while to decipher that they were demanding toffees and chocolates. One of the children even went as far as to tell my friend in Hindi, "Don't look at us. Just give us toppi and chokolat."

Indeed, the villagers themselves did their best to avoid any contact. The entire path was inundated with shiny plastic garbage — Lays chips packets and Dairy Milk wrappers strewn everywhere. "Is this deliberately dumped on our path, to send us a message?" wondered a fellow trekker. A child playing with his friends

got reprimanded for shaking hands with us; a middle-aged woman carrying logs lunged to the side at the sight of us and waited till the whole group passed; an elderly man sitting in one of the four wood-and-metal temples quickly shut his eyes. Outside the temples hung boards in Hindi and English saying photography and touching were prohibited — any detractors would be fined ₹2,500. One of the veteran trekkers quipped, "When I started coming here a decade ago, the fine was ₹1,000. Looks like they adjust for inflation, too."

Malana's equation with the outside world, according to reports, changed drastically when a great fire — what villagers thought to be the wrath of their deity Jamlu — struck in 2008. Their houses and temples gutted, the village, so full of mysticism, shrouded in enigma, was rebuilt with help from the outside.

It was after this that the extreme nature of the village changed for the better, say observers. For instance, some Malanis got their voter ids and today, one can see DTH dishes lined on walls. The link between Malana and the situation that the Malanis' supposed descendants are now facing in Greece is hard to miss. Like how the fire destroyed Malana, an economic meltdown destroyed Greece. And like how outsiders helped Malana, the European Union has bailed out the Mediterranean country. Whether Greece can rebuild something better from the embers, remains to be seen.

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